NEWS

Pope Leo to visit Spain this year, w Madrid, Barcelona and Canary cardinal says

by Joseph Wilson - Associated Press January 9, 2026

Pope Leo XIV meets faithfuls at the end of his weekly general audience in the Paul VI Hall at the Vatican, W Photo/Alessandra Tarantino

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Leo XIV is planning to travel to Spain this year, with stops in Madrid, Barcelona and the Canary Islands to fulfil Pope Francis' wish of visiting a key migration entry point to Europe, a Spanish cardinal said Friday.

Cardinal José Cobo Cano, the archbishop of Madrid, announced

plans for the trip were underway after meeting with a top official in the Vatican secretary of state to discuss the itinerary. While June had been rumored as the possible date, Cobo said the timing of the trip was still up in the air.

Word of the planned papal trip came a day after the Spanish government announced a landmark agreement, strongly supported by the Vatican, in which Spain's Catholic bishops agreed to let the state ombudsman have the final say in church-funded compensation for victims of clergy sexual abuse.

Spain had long lobbied for Francis to visit, but over 12 years he always declined. Francis preferred to travel to smaller countries, oftentimes far away, where Catholics were a minority.

Speaking to journalists after the meeting, Cobo said the current proposal calls for Leo to visit the capital, Madrid, and the city of Barcelona, where he would visit the Sagrada Familia basilica. This year marks the 100th anniversary of the death of the basilica architect Antoni Gaudí, who is on the path to possible beatification.

The plan calls for Leo to also visit the Canary Islands, a Spanish archipelago off northwest Africa. The islands experience large numbers of migrant arrivals from West Africa. While Francis had long declined to visit the Spanish mainland, he had had hoped to visit the Canary Islands as part of his longstanding outreach to migrants and refugees.

Leo has echoed Francis' concern Friday, telling the Vatican's diplomatic corps in his annual foreign policy speech that migrants enjoy inalienable rights. He said he hoped that countries' efforts to crack down on human trafficking ""will not become a pretext for undermining the dignity of migrants and refugees."

The Spain trip would mark the first known travel plans for Leo in

2026. The American pope has said he wants to visit Africa this year, especially Algeria, which played an important role in the life of St. Augustine, the inspiration for Leo's Augustinian religious order. Leo has also said he hopes to return to his beloved Peru, where he lived for two decades as a missionary, and to Argentina and Uruguay, which had unsuccessfully lobbied for a visit by the Argentine pope during his pontificate.

The announced trip came a day after the Spanish government said that the Spanish Catholic hierarchy had agreed to let the state ombudsman have the final say in compensating victims of clergy sexual abuse, a remarkable concession by the church.

Justice Minister Félix Bolaños, who led the talks with the Spanish bishops, credited the Vatican with having pushed for the deal despite the opposition of some Spanish bishops. Spanish abuse survivors had criticized the bishops' original in-house compensation proposal as lacking any oversight.

"I have the feeling that the Holy See has pushed for this, that the Spanish church has signed the agreement, but I also have the feeling that some bishops in Spain are not entirely enthusiastic about this agreement," he said in an interview with Cadena Ser radio.

The deal is a remarkable concession by the Spanish church to allow the state to intervene in its internal handling of abuse claims. It is evidence of how the Spanish hierarchy has lost credibility over revelations of decades of abuse and cover-up by the hierarchy that were documented in 2023 by the ombudsman's office.